

Culberson, newly elected to Texas' Seventh Congressional District. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary Paige.

Remarks at Merritt Extended Elementary School January 25, 2001

It's always a good sign when the principal gets a standing ovation—[laughter]—from teachers and parents. Having spent some quality time with you, I now understand why.

First, Mr. Superintendent, thank you very much. Your reputation is a strong one because you believe every child can learn and are willing to work hard and make the tough decisions to make sure every child does learn in the District. Mr. Superintendent, thanks for coming.

I am so pleased and honored that the chairman of the Senate Education Committee and the ranking minority leader, Senator Jeffords and Senator Kennedy, are here; Chairman Boehner, Representative Miller came as well. You all did not have to come. And for you to come is not only a great honor for this school, but Laura and I really appreciate it.

I'm also pleased the First Lady is here. I always used to say, you can always judge the nature of a man by the company he keeps. [Laughter] And I keep pretty darn good company—[laughter]—particularly when it comes to children and reading and education. She is a former public school librarian who loves children, who loves books, and has got the ability to combine the two. And I love her.

Dr. Shannon, thanks for coming. Those of us who have been involved with public education know this irrefutable fact, that the quality of a school depends on the quality of a principal; that when you find a good principal, the CEO of a school, you'll find a school that achieves what we all want: every child learning.

And there are some basic principles involved. One is to have leadership, not only at the district level but at the school level, set the highest of high standards. Leaders that understand that every child can learn and refuse to accept excuses when they don't. Dr. Shannon believes that way. She asked a question, "Why aren't our children achieving?" And when they begin to achieve, she raises the bar. That's what a leader does.

Secondly, and the reason we've come to Merritt, besides getting out of the White House—[laughter]—is to herald what happens inside the walls here. And what happens here is there is a strong sense of accountability, which means there is a strong sense of the possible. Accountability is so important. And by accountability I mean testing children to determine whether or not children are learning. I believe it's the cornerstone of reform. I believe it's the essence of excellence in education, and I believe it's important to do so, to test every year, to make sure children are not left behind.

I worry about a system that doesn't test, because I ask the question, like Dr. Shannon asked the question, "How do you know if you don't?" I worry about a system that periodically tests, because one year you may test, and everything is fine. In 4 years, you measure again, and all of a sudden something isn't fine, and you've missed 4 years of opportunity to make sure a child doesn't slip behind.

Accountability is important for students. It's important for—and I know students don't like to take tests, and I'm confident the parents here heard the same thing

Laura and I heard when our daughters went to Austin High School, “We’re sick of tests.” And my answer was, “Well, I’m sorry you’re sick of it, but we want to know. We, the adults, want to know whether or not you’re learning, because if you’re not, we expect something else to happen.” So it’s important for children to take tests so they can tell how they stand.

It’s important for parents. There’s a lot of discussion about parental involvement. Senator Kennedy asked a very good question—how is parental involvement? I thought the principal gave a very good answer. But there’s no better way to encourage parental involvement than to diagnose, on a child-by-child basis, where a child stands. There’s no better way to get a parent’s attention than for a principal to send the word, “Well, we’re having a little trouble with your child. We want your child to succeed.”

The worst thing that can happen from a parent’s perspective is there be no information. The worst thing that can happen is that the parent think everything is fine—“Well, my child may have passed a test in the third grade, but there’s been no measurement in the fourth, fifth, or sixth, so I will just assume as a parent that everything is fine”—and then wake up and realize things aren’t fine. To me, that’s a shame, when and if our systems do that to parents.

And finally, measurement is important for management and teachers. First, I want to thank the teachers. Teaching is a noble profession. We need more teachers. And one of the jobs that Laura is going to take on—and to a certain extent, I hope I can, too—is to encourage youngsters to become teachers. That means, of course, safe classrooms. It means making sure teachers can teach a curriculum that works.

There’s nothing better than combining the love of a teacher with the talent and tools necessary to be able to make sure children learn. But it also means convincing teachers of the importance and power of

accountability. A good teacher welcomes accountability, because a good teacher understands that measurement is the kernel for success. A good teacher will be able to see in real stark terms the fruits of his or her labor. A good teacher is somebody who says, “Give me a chance to succeed, and I can prove I can succeed.”

There’s a lot of people in our society who fear accountability. Dr. Shannon, when asked by one of the Members of the congressional delegation about accountability, she said, “At first people were afraid of accountability.” And I can understand that. If you haven’t been held accountable, and all of a sudden somebody starts holding you accountable, it’s going to create a certain sense of anxiety. But I suspect she’ll testify to this fact, that once the accountability measures came in place, once people got used to what it meant to be accountable—that accountability is not a tool to punish but a tool to reward and a tool necessary to correct deficiencies; it’s a positive tool; it’s a positive application—then people begin to accept the importance of a strong measurement system.

So we’re here to applaud leadership and teachers, and we’re here to applaud a school and a district that has got a vision, a vision of high standards and strong measurement systems; a school that not only measures, but when it finds deficiency, corrects; a school that recognizes an accountability will work when you view each child as a child, not as some group—part of a group. An accountability system says every child matters, and when we find a child deficient, we’re going to correct.

Some say, “The accountability systems tend to restrict curriculum, that, oh, all the school will do is teach the test.” This school proves that’s not the case. This school focuses on basic education in reading and math. And by the way, they’ve got a fabulous curriculum for reading, one that works.

But this school also is a school that enriches beyond the basics of reading and math. It’s a school that’s got a curriculum

that is focused on basic education, but it's a school also that understands the importance of the arts. It's a school that broadens the horizons of the students.

We're here to tout excellence and to thank—to thank the good folks in this institution, inside this building, who love our children and are willing to put their love into practice in a system that works.

So, Dr. Shannon, thank you very much for having us. We're so honored to be here. Again, I want to thank the Members of the congressional delegation that came up, as well. It's a real treat to be able to walk

around the halls of a successful school and, most importantly, be able to look children in the eye and wish them all the best, encourage them to go to college. But thanks for having us. It's our honor to be here.

God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:30 a.m. in the multipurpose room. In his remarks, he referred to Nancy R. Shannon, principal, Merritt Extended Elementary School; and Paul L. Vance, superintendent, District of Columbia Public Schools.

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Congressional Leaders and an Exchange With Reporters

January 25, 2001

The President. Thank you all for coming. It's an honor to be here with the chairman and ranking member of the committee, members of the Education Committee in the House of Representatives.

We're going to spend a lot of time talking about education until a bill works its way through the House and the Senate. It's a priority of mine, but the good news is, it's also a priority of the Members here around the table. And I am actually confident that we can forge an education bill that will achieve a lot of objectives: high standards, local control of schools, but the most important objective of all is that every child in America gets educated. It is a national priority, and it's a goal that I'm actually confident that this great Nation can achieve.

So it's an honor to welcome Members of the Congress here to have a frank discussion. I'll be glad to answer a few questions.

Federal Reserve Board Chairman

Q. Is there a comment at all on Mr. Greenspan's comment this morning on the

need for tax cuts and the effect it might have on the economy?

The President. I was pleased to hear Mr. Greenspan's words. I felt they were measured and just right. He recognizes that we need good monetary policy and sound fiscal policy to make sure that the economy grows. So I was pleased.

Q. He also seemed to indicate that having the tax cut in place was one of the issues—or one of the main criteria in having a tax cut that would benefit the economy. Do you read that as support for a retroactive tax cut or an accelerated measure?

The President. I don't think Alan Greenspan was supporting any particular plan. I know he wasn't going to the Hill to say, "Well, President Bush has got the right plan." I felt like he was speaking about policy in general. His job is to report to the Congress in an objective way, and that's exactly how I read it.

I've got my view of how to enact tax relief. I suspect others in the Congress will have their view. But what Alan Greenspan was saying to the Nation is that in order